

Personality & Leader Behavior & Overdoing It



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Following McCall and Lombardo's (1983) book on managerial derailment, the phrase, "a strength can become a weakness," is now used regularly in discussions of leadership. McCall and Lombardo noticed that qualities initially regarded as assets turned into liabilities: (a) managers who were commended for their assertiveness were later criticized for being overbearing; (b) detail-oriented managers with deep technical expertise were well regarded in middle-management but came to be seen as unable to think strategically at the executive level. This dynamic of strengths becoming weaknesses has been used to explain many CEO failures in recent years.

PERSONALITY AND STRENGTHS OVERUSED

The early derailment research identified two distinct themes, strengths overused and personality flaws (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010). Bentz (1985), in an analysis of failed executives at Sears, concluded that each of them had what he termed an "over-riding personality defect." But derailment research did not explore the connection between personality and strengths overused. However, recent studies suggest such a connection by revealing curvilinear relationships between personality and performance. For example, Le, Oh, Robbins, Ilies, Holland, & Westrick, (2010) found that scores on Conscientiousness measures increased with

supervisor ratings of task performance up to one SD above the mean on Conscientiousness but even higher scores were associated with decreases in performance. The same trend was found between personality scores for Emotional Stability and task performance and citizenship behavior. Managers scoring highest on Emotional Stability were rated lower than those in the average range. Similarly, a separate study by Ames and Flynn (2007) reported a curvilinear relationship between assertiveness and leadership effectiveness. Leaders who scored high on assertiveness had teams that got more done but the team members reported less favorable work attitudes; productivity also began to decline at the highest levels of assertiveness. Although Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and assertiveness are regarded as desirable attributes in leaders, these studies demonstrate that they can undermine performance at extreme levels.

The foregoing research establishes empirical links between personality and strengths overused. However, the topic deserves further exploration because the mechanisms are unspecified. For example, what behaviors of extremely assertive leaders degrade employee motivation and engagement? Furthermore, the research raises more questions about the relationship between personality and strengths overused. For example, what dimensions besides

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Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Assertiveness may be counterproductive at the extremes? And is it possible that extremely low standing on some personality dimensions may be associated with excessive behavior? Our study addresses some of these questions by determining the level of the personality dimensions, both at the high and low ends of the continuum, that are associated with extreme, counterproductive forms of their associated behaviors.

PERSONALITY AND OVERDOING IT PREDICTIONS

The connection between personality and strengths overused is straightforward. People with extreme scores on a given personality dimension exhibit more extreme behavior than individuals with scores in the middle range (Schuman & Presser, 1981). For example, a manager who scores two SDs above the mean on assertiveness is more likely to initiate activity than is a manager who scores near the mean. Asserting authority may not be appropriate, such as when subordinates are highly skilled and motivated (Vecchio & Boatright, 2002). However, it is also possible that extremely low assertiveness could be associated with excessive behavior of other forms. For instance, a manager at the very low end of assertiveness may not provide adequate direction and structure. On the upside, this could be seen as empowering, but on the downside it may be seen as giving too much leeway.

We assessed personality using the HPI and we assessed leader behavior criteria using the Leadership Versatility Index (LVI), a multi-rater instrument that contains four scales concerning Forceful, Enabling, Strategic, and Operational behaviors (Kaiser, Overfield, & Kaplan, 2010). The LVI behavior items are rated with a “too little/too much” scale that ranges from -4 to +4. Degrees of “too little” are represented from -4 to -1, “the right amount” is represented by 0, and degrees of “too much” are represented from +1 to +4. The data consisted of HPI scores for 126 managers and LVI ratings from 1,512 of their coworkers. The managers were mostly male (79%) with an average age of 45 years, and 16 years of managerial experience. We anticipated that excessive leader behavior would be associated with (1) high personality scores for each of the positively-related HPI scale-leader behavior predictions, and (2) low personality scores for each of the negatively-related HPI scale-leader behavior predictions.

A remaining question concerns how high or low scores need to be to produce excessive leader behavior. We expected that the functions relating personality to leader behavior would go from an optimal level to “too much” around one SD above the mean on the personality continuum for positive personality-behavior predictions. On the low end of the personality continuum, we assumed a mirror-image pattern where personality scores around one SD below the mean would be associated with the crossover to “too much” of the leader behavior.

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RESULTS FROM OVERDOING IT PREDICTIONS

We analyzed the level of the HPI scales corresponding to the optimal amount versus too much of their associated leader behaviors. For each HPI scale-LVI behavior relationship that was both predicted and supported empirically, we computed a regression equation relating the two variables. Next, we solved the regression equations for values on the LVI behavior equal to zero, the point corresponding to what raters defined as “the right amount” of the behavior, and two SDs above this point, to represent what raters defined as “overdoing it.” The resulting values for the HPI scales from these equations are (a) the personality scale score associated with the optimal amount of the given leader behavior and (b) the personality scale score associated with doing “too much” of the leader behavior. These critical HPI scale values for each LVI behavior are presented in Table 1, and the regression equations representing these relationships are depicted in Figure 1 (see *page five*).

The results supported the prediction that overdoing leader behavior would be associated with both high and low personality scores. However, there was an important asymmetry. For high scores, our results were similar to those reported by other researchers that personality scores one SD above the mean

were associated with decreased effectiveness. The point on the HPI personality continua associated with doing significantly too much of the behavior was at a similar level, around the 80th percentile for the personality dimensions that were positively related to corresponding behaviors (e.g., Ambition and Forceful, Interpersonal Sensitivity and Enabling, Inquisitive and Strategic, and Prudence and Operational leadership).

On the other hand, low scores associated with too much leader behavior were less extreme. Personality scores around the 34th percentile, on average, were associated with overdoing the inversely related behavior (e.g., Prudence and Strategic leadership, Inquisitive and Operational leadership). These values are far less than one SD below the mean. It appears that the threshold for negatively related personality traits to be associated with overdoing leader behaviors is more sensitive than the threshold for positively related traits.

CONCLUSIONS

Personality was related to the excessive use of all four leader behaviors. We found that excessive and counterproductive behavior was associated with personality scores about one SD above the mean. Each personality dimension was associated with overdoing some leader behavior. This

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highlights a role for personality in taking desirable behaviors and skills to counter-productive extremes (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009). High scores were associated with both too much of some leader behaviors and too little of complementary behaviors. For instance, a high score on Ambition was associated with too much Forceful behavior and also too little Enabling behavior. There are two related ways in which strengths become weaknesses (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2009): first by promoting too much of one behavior and second by inhibiting the use of an opposing but complementary behavior. Finally, low personality scores also can be associated with strengths overused, and the threshold for these effects may be particularly sensitive. On average, low personality scores did not need to deviate as much from the mean to be associated with excessive behavior compared to high personality scores. Further theory and research is needed to better understand the asymmetry in the points at which positively related traits are associated with too much of a given behavior compared to negatively related traits.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

As depicted in Figure 1, both high and low personality scores were associated with suboptimal performance in terms of doing too much of some leader behaviors and too little of others. Scores in the moderate range generally were associated with optimal levels of leader behavior. Extreme personality scores should be interpreted in terms of their associated “strengths” and desirable qualities, and in terms of tradeoffs in the potential to overdo those strengths as well as neglect opposing but complementary behaviors. This interpretation of personality assessment results is relevant in both the selection and development of leaders.

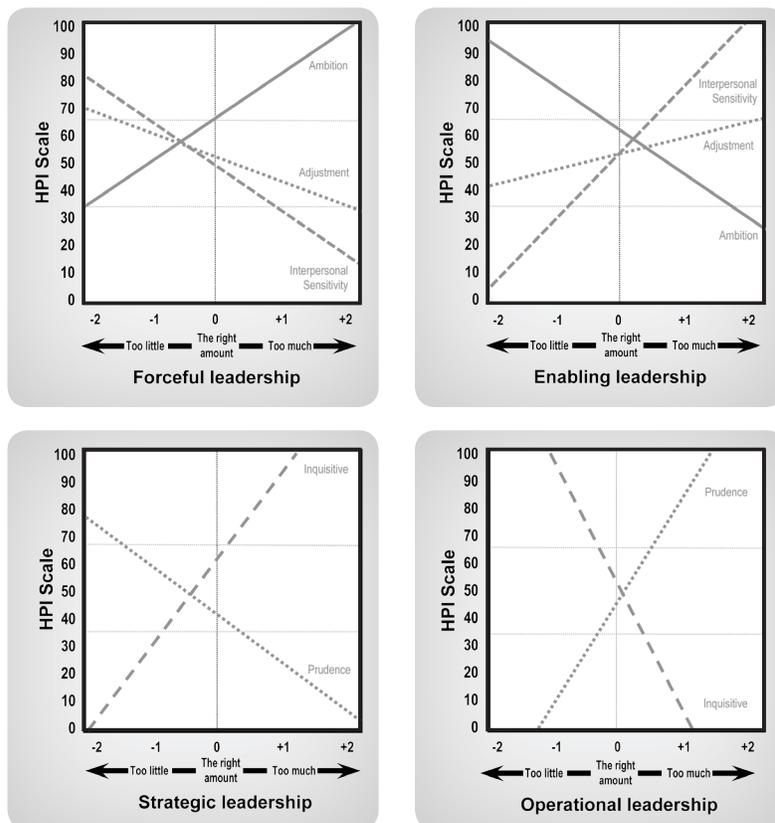
Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) distinguish two perspectives on development that are relevant for coaching managers. The internal perspective comes from a person’s self-evaluation of his or her skills and behavior. The external perspective comes from others’ evaluations. In some cases, a manager’s self-evaluation will be shockingly out of touch with the observers’ views. Because other peoples’ evaluations define a person’s success, development depends on aligning the inner and outer perspectives. This alignment is how we define self-awareness. Prerequisites include the desire to improve, self-control to perform, moderate (not high or low) self-confidence, insight about other people, and rationality (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003). During this process, personality doesn’t change; however, with the development of self-awareness, behavior can change. Behavior change, not personality change, is the primary goal of development (Peterson, 2010; Warrenfeltz & Seldman, 2011).

TABLE 1 HPI Scale Percentile Scores Associated with “The Right Amount” and “Too Much” of LVI Leader Behaviors

HPI Scale	LVI Leader Behavior							
	Forceful		Enabling		Strategic		Operational	
	0, "the right amt."	+2 SD "too much"	0, "the right amt."	+2 SD "too much"	0, "the right amt."	+2 SD "too much"	0, "the right amt."	+2 SD "too much"
Ambition	67	(83)	60	(44)				
Sociability								
Interpersonal Sensitivity	46	(32)	56	(81)				
Prudence					39	(28)	51	(70)
Adjustment	50	(41)	53	(58)				
Inquisitive					67	(87)	48	(24)
Learning Approach								

Notes: N = 126 managers and executives. Values are the HPI scale percentile scores associated with scores of “0, the right amount” and +2 SD (in parentheses) in the “too much” direction above “0, the right amount” on the LVI leader behavior scales.

FIGURE 1



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FOOTNOTE

¹A complete report of this research appears in:

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